Nicodemus and Jesus Christ
(Article)

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”
John 3:16–18 (BSB)

Introduction:

Among all Bible verses, John 3:16 is likely the most well-known. (1) However, as we see in the opening passage above, the immediate context matters, since we understand from the following two verses, that eternal salvation and eternal condemnation, are a result of either believing in Jesus Christ, or not. There is no middle ground.

In the segment we are exploring here (John 3:1-21) we have the record of an encounter between Jesus Christ and Nicodemus (Gr. Nicodēmos, meaning ‘conqueror over the people’), who is a leading Pharisee (“a leader of the Jews”) as well as a member of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish high court at the time). (2) Considering the mentioning of the Jewish Passover feast and Jesus’ temple clearing (John 2:13, 23) we get the impression that Nicodemus is visiting Jesus following these events, somewhere in or near Jerusalem at night time. (3)

It is this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus that we are looking at here - where we learn about Nicodemus’ real need, namely a transformation of heart through the Holy Spirit to make it possible for Him to see God’s kingdom in all its fulness. (4) There are two parts: First, we are considering the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3:1-12) and second, we are considering how Jesus expands upon His teaching in what appears to be similar to a monologue (John 3:13-21).

Dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1-12)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs You are doing if God were not with him.” Jesus replied, ***“Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”*** “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time to be born?” Jesus answered, ***“Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh is born of flesh, but spirit is born of the Spirit. Do not be amazed that I said, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”*** “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. **“You are Israel’s teacher,”** said Jesus, ***“and you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, and yet you people do not accept our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”***
John 3:1–12 (BSB)

Commentary:

As mentioned, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, visits Jesus at night (v.1-2). It is uncertain why Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, yet addressing him as “Rabbi” shows his respect towards Jesus. (5) However, Jesus is not flattered by these words, since He knows the heart of Nicodemus and sees that he does not have true faith (yet), as Jesus proclaims, “Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (v.3). (6) In other words, Jesus is talking about a necessary ‘new birth’ which precedes salvation (“to see the kingdom of God” in v.3). (7)

Nicodemus’ question in v.4 demonstrates spiritual blindness (8) - as he is a representative of Jerusalem’s religious leaders, many of which openly opposed Jesus - and shows that Nicodemus had no idea at all what Jesus is talking about. (9) Note that Jesus’ words “truly, truly” used several times in this exchange (v.3, 5, 11) (a form of agreement, like ‘Amen, amen’) confirm the importance and trustworthiness of what He is about to say.

When Jesus talks about being “born of water and the Spirit” as prerequisite to “enter the kingdom of God” (v.5) the “water” and “Spirit” create a single conceptual unit indicating a rebirth as a result of the Holy Spirit cleansing and reviving a regenerate person. (11) There is a precedent here from the Old Testament, where water as cleanser is connected to the coming of the Spirit at the end times (12):

> I will also sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and to carefully observe My ordinances.
>
> Ezekiel 36:25–27 (BSB)

Other Old Testament antecedents can be found in Isaiah 44:3, as well as Isaiah 12:3; 32:2; 35:7; 41:17-18; 43:20; 49:10 and 55:1, so it is Jesus who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. (13) As such, the “water” in v.5 does not refer to physical water, or baptism, but as a conceptual unity points directly to Christ. (14)

Jesus then clarifies this rebirth further (v.6-8) by contrasting “flesh” and “Spirit” - the natural birth (flesh) is very different than the spiritual birth (Spirit), and only the latter enables entrance into God’s kingdom. (15) The connection between the Holy Spirit and the wind, shows that it is God’s sovereign will, who will be regenerated and who will not. There is no man-made mechanism, ritual, or specific ‘good deed’ a person can do, in order to be saved.

In v.9 we hear Nicodemus speaking for the last time, as he is inquiring “how can this be?” When Jesus retorts (“You are Israel’s teacher,” v.10), He is implying that Nicodemus should have understood what Jesus is talking about. (16) While Jesus generally refers to Himself as ‘I,” in v.11, His use of “we” may refer to Himself and the witness of the Holy Spirit, since the Holy Spirit is part of what Jesus is trying to teach Nicodemus.(17) In v.12 then, Jesus’ question does not only challenge Nicodemus and his earthly authority, but also prepares to get him ready for the teaching of spiritual realities Jesus wants to convey.

Jesus Expands His Teaching (John 3:13-21)

"No one has ascended into heaven except the One who descended from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. And this is the verdict: The Light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness rather than the Light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come into the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever practices the truth comes into the Light, so that it may be seen clearly that what he has done has been accomplished in God."
John 3:13–21 (BSB)

Commentary:

In this second part of His encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus expands on His earlier teaching. In v.13 Jesus reveals His unique qualification to reveal divine truth, since He Himself is the "Son of Man." (18) In v.14 Jesus is bringing the Old Testament back to Nicodemus' mind, as He points to the new life the Israelites received as they looked at Moses' bronze serpent (Numbers 21:5-9) - Jesus then links this event directly to Himself (v.15) relating that believers in Christ have and continue to enjoy eternal life both now and in the age to come. (19)

As Jesus continues his discourse to Nicodemus, v.16 is among the most quoted promises in Scripture. (20) Here, the verb 'to love' (*agapaō*) and the noun 'love' (*agapē*) - are most frequently used in John 13-17 (21) - with v.16-21 revealing the universal implications of the foregoing conversation: God-the Father sends and gives His own son, pointing to both the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. (22) The next verse (v.17) is a restatement of v.16, that is God's purpose for Christ is to make possible salvation through Him. (23)

The issue of belief and unbelief is addressed by Jesus in v. 18, revealing that those who do not believe in Christ are self-condemned. This leads

directly to the verdict Jesus announces in v.19, where unbelievers remain condemned prior to and at the Last Judgment, whereas believers have eternal life both now and for all eternity. (24)

The contrast between unbelievers ('those who do evil and hate the light' - the light is Jesus - in v.20) and believers ('those who practice the truth and come into the light' in v.21) i.e. those who act in conformity with the truth (25) concludes the discussion with Nicodemus.

As such, v.13-21 provides Jesus' testimony concerning His mission, that is descending to earth as God-incarnate, revealing Himself as the Messiah, being crucified to atone for sin, and to be resurrected. (26) Thus, v.17 points right to Jesus' mission, v.19 provides the verdict (Gk. *krisis*) revealing how some people value pride above integrity - to the point of hating the light and refusing to go near it - and v.21 reveals those who believe in Jesus and are in union with Him ('coming into the light'). (27) The verses to follow (John 3:22-36) which is a dialogue between John the Baptist and his disciples, reinforces the themes found in Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus. (28)

Conclusion:

In summary, we see the astonishing truths Jesus reveals as He is talking with Nicodemus. For one, we see that Jesus is omniscient in that He sees the true state of every person's heart. (29) That is why Jesus cuts right to the chase, *even before* Nicodemus asks any question (v.3). At the same time, we see our Lord's patience as He clears up misunderstanding, here about being 'born again.' (30) Thereby, the reference to being "born of the water and the Spirit" (v.5) is a reference to the Old Testament (Ezekiel 36:25-27) clearly with the predicted spiritual cleansing, characteristic of Messianic times. (31)

Also, we see how the Holy Spirit is inseparably connected with Jesus' person and His ministry (v. 6-8), since ultimately the life-giving Spirit provides eternal life, based solely on the death and resurrection of Christ. (32)

What matters most is that - based on Jesus' clear teaching - those who believe in Him will have eternal life, while those who reject God's Son are self-condemned to eternal darkness, separated from God in hell. (33) It is God in His sovereignty who draws people to Himself, as Jesus illustrates in v.8 and it is Christ's firsthand testimony we are to follow.(34)

Thus, it is God's initiative to help anyone who believes in Jesus Christ - to begin a relationship with God (1 John 4:19). (35) Salvation is accomplished

solely through God’s grace (Ephesians 2:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 2:11) - and the prerequisites for us are repentance, faith and obedience. (36)

As in the case of Nicodemus, we see this faith in Christ growing: moving from darkness to light (John 3:1-21), publicly displaying his faith at the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-52) and risking his own life and reputation following Jesus’ death (John 19:39-42). (37) This last action of Nicodemus, as recorded in the Bible, tells us how he joins Joseph of Arimathea, assisting him in the burial of Jesus’ body (38) and providing expensive perfumes (John 19:39) - so, the final remedy against spiritual darkness, is believing in Jesus Christ, who is the light that has come into the world. (39)

Appendix
(John 3:1-21)

John 3:1–21 (BSB)
1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs You are doing if God were not with him.” 3 Jesus replied, “Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” 4 “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time to be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh is born of flesh, but spirit is born of the Spirit. 7 Do not be amazed that I said, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows where it wishes. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”
9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. 10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, and yet you people do not accept our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly

things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the One who descended from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.
17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. 18 Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 And this is the verdict: The Light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness rather than the Light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come into the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever practices the truth comes into the Light, so that it may be seen clearly that what he has done has been accomplished in God."

Notes

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Pastor John

Amen.